Although the modern mentality relegates religion to the realm of private life, faith-based Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) or religious NGOs (RNGOs) represent a unique hybrid of religious beliefs and socio-political activism at all levels of society. Differing from congregational and denominational structures, which tend to focus on the development of their membership, RNGOs seek to fulfill explicitly public missions (Catholic Relief Services, 2001; Salvation Army, 2001a; World Vision, 20001). Understanding of RNGO's operations and influence has also been limited by the lack of documentary data and available literature about these organizations. This paper draws on a recently advanced definition of NGOs (Martens, 2002) in defining "religious NGOs" as formal organization whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teaching of one or more religious or spiritual traditions and which operates on a non-profit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level. Literature about RNGOs has largely confined itself to studies of Christian organizations at the UN (Butler, 2000, Malicky, 1968; Richter, 2001), case studies (Baggett, 2001; Metraux, 1994), or a general treatment of the subject from political (Johnson and Sampson, 1994) conflict resolution (Appleby, 2000) or management (Brinckerhoff, 1999; Jeavons, 1994), perspectives.

Research for this paper was conducted in Sokoto between February 2007 and December 2008. The study adopted a qualitative approach where the emphasis was on gathering a maximum range of perspective on the dynamics ICSO’s response to the crisis in educational provision. Interviews were conducted with government officials in charge of formal education, academicians, leaders of faith-based Islamic schools, and other stake holders, and other stake holders who were in a position to comment on the evolution of modern Islamic schools and their relationship with the state to obtain independent observations of political, economic and social factors that have set the dynamics of Islamic educational reform in Nigeria. The paper began with an observation that since the second half of the 1980s when the economic fortune of Nigeria began its back-ward slide resulting in the growing inability of the government to properly fund the education sector, the communities responded by establishing their distinctively Islamic schools. The objective was not only to fill in the resource gap but also to convert what is perceived as Muslim parents' half-hearted attitude towards 'Western and secular' type of education, devoid of moral and spiritual values. The indifference of the parents is reflected in the attitudes and lack of motivation of many Muslim students. Indeed, the re-assertion of parental values and control in schools within a religious world-view is clearly the reason for the widespread participation of religious NGO’s in educational service provisioning. A World Bank (1998) report for the North-West zone of Nigeria comments on this phenomenon as follows: “The drive by religiously inclined people to establish or re-establish primary schools with frank religious leaning is indicative of an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the decadence of the nation’s economic and social life. The apparent, if not, palpable lack of morality, accountability coupled with the levity with which public affairs economic activities and especially business are treated, dictates that some action be taken. Education of the young is deemed an appropriate point to start. Its relevance cannot be understated (...). Government schools fail to transmit moral values. The belief underlying the drive to make input into primary education is that living by religious standards is far better than living by the man-made ethics prevailing in Nigeria today. Training the child in good living and giving him standards set by religion and living by them will have a beneficial effect on public life, since one’s private life will be set in order. People will do what is right before God - conduct themselves honestly in all things. The religious schools are geared towards setting a good example." (P. 50).

However, in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society like Nigeria the solution to this problem lies in the hands of the Muslim themselves. The Muslims seem to have found solution to their
problem in the establishment of more and more private Model Islamic Schools by Islamic organizations and individuals.

The policy of all the main religious groups has been to encourage female education and work. Women have been exhorted at every available forum to acquire education and participate in building the society and men to permit their daughters and wives to do so. By implication therefore non-governmental Muslim organizations have to be anti-kuil (purdah), at least in its restrictive form, as this is clearly not compatible with pursuit of modern education by women or working in the formal sector. This is the unaccounted service religious organizations provide to female gender and the nation. The society is on its way towards change.

Even though these organizations were found to be engaged in diverse aspects of social provisioning, their impact is more visible in the sphere of education and political mobilization. As a direct consequence of their activities, significant strides were also recorded in area of female education and political awareness. The religious CSOs involvement in service provisioning generally takes an assertive form. In the area of education, for instance, rather than acting as a safety net - maintaining a service whose condition often seems to be one of crisis or imminent collapse. Cases discussed here depict religious CSOs as active determinants of the direction and management of their schools. Moreover, by developing a curriculum combining Islamic studies with that of the formal public schools, the religious CSOs have succeeded in reducing the stigma attached to Western-type education and this will certainly help to improve enrolment and attendance.

This, no doubt, point to a critical area of cooperation between the public and private sectors of the economy in the education service provision.